

# Martha Washington

## 1731–1802



**WHY SHE MADE HISTORY** Martha Dandridge Custis Washington, wife of George Washington, was the first First Lady of the United States.



*As you read the biography below, think about how Martha Washington's early life may have influenced her feelings about being a first lady.*

As wife of the first president, Martha Washington set the style for all first ladies who would come after her. The elegance and grace with which she entertained guests of the presidential mansion started a tradition that continues today.

Born on a plantation near Williamsburg, Virginia, Martha Dandridge was the eldest of eight siblings. At 18, she married Daniel Park Custis, a wealthy planter several years her senior. Together they had four children, but two died in infancy. After a brief illness, Custis died in 1757, making Martha one of the richest women in Virginia. She was left alone to raise two small children, and run an estate that covered more than 17,000 acres.

Martha later met a Virginia Militia colonel named George Washington. They married in 1759, and Martha and her two children moved into Washington's Mount Vernon estate.

Between 1775 and 1780, Martha Washington often accompanied her husband to battlegrounds during the Revolutionary War. She joined her husband at his headquarters and camps during the war, spending winters at Valley Forge and Morristown, New Jersey.



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### VOCABULARY

**electoral college** group selected from each state to cast votes in presidential elections

In 1789, the **electoral college** unanimously selected George Washington to be the first president of the United States, making Martha Washington America's first first lady. The White House had not yet been built, so the first family moved to a house in New York.

Called "Lady Washington," Martha held the position with dignity and grace, but did not enjoy being first lady. In addition to running the house, Martha Washington was in charge of planning and hosting formal dinners, receptions, and parties. She wrote that she felt like a "state prisoner" in the role. But she worked hard in her position, and visiting dignitaries were impressed with the elegance of the presidential household and hospitality.

After serving a second term, George and Martha Washington moved back to Mount Vernon. George Washington died in 1799. Martha continued living at Mount Vernon until her death in 1802. Before she died, she freed the slaves on the family plantation and burned all the letters that she and her husband had written each other over the years.

### WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. Recall one detail from the passage above that you found interesting about Martha Washington.

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2. **Draw Conclusions** Why do you think Martha Washington did not like being a first lady?

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### ACTIVITY

3. Imagine that you have been asked to interview Martha Washington. On a separate sheet of paper, make a list of three or four questions that you would like to ask Martha Washington about her life.